A PRECOCIOUS BOOKWORM

I was born and grew up in a middle-class family. My father was a professor of mathematics at a polytechnic college, a brilliant teacher with moderately liberal leanings but without any serious interest in politics. He conducted summer courses to prepare high-school graduates for competitive examinations to enter specialized colleges. Because of his exceptional success as a teacher, he always had a great many students and was fairly well-to-do.

I was the second of four children. We received our primary education from private tutors at home, and I entered high school at fourteen. Our father was very proud of this system of private education. Perhaps it was as good for us as a public school would have been. If it did not teach us how to mix with other people, it favored a rapid accumulation of knowledge in our early years.

My first passion was for mathematics. When I was twelve, my father introduced me into the mysteries of calculus. Although I preferred various branches of geometry, at fourteen I was also fairly familiar with advanced algebra. Then I suddenly lost all interest in mathematics and turned to the social sciences. Not far from our home was a private library founded by a well-known educator. It held an excellent collection of books on economics, statistics, and history, and I became its most devoted patron. There was nobody to guide my reading—my father's influence ended with my desertion of mathematics—so I read books on economics at random, jumping from one author to another. At that time, however, I had an almost photographic memory and could readily memorize anything I had read—poetry, prose, arguments, names, and statistics. Thus it did not matter much in which order I devoured the library books.

High school had nothing to offer me. I stood highest in my class and was a kind of freak exhibit for the teachers. After a few weeks I was permitted to bring my library books to the classroom, and I read them without caring what went on around me. In return for this privilege I was always on hand when the director or a distinguished guest visited the classroom. Then I would show off for our teacher—in religion as readily as in Latin or mathematics—by answering the guest's questions.

In summer, I lectured in my father's school. I looked older than I was, had inherited some of my father's speaking ability, and was rather successful in this role. But I was not very popular with my classmates and had few friends among them. Actually, I developed into a bookworm continuously preoccupied with accumulation of